"Catching the nearest way":

Free Will as the Cause of Tragedy in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Abstract

Macbeth poses the dilemma of free will through the premonitions of the Weird Sisters. They tell Macbeth that he will be king, and from the moment he knows his future, he starts speculating the ways to kingship. He is aware that he can wait for chance to crown him or take the throne by violent means. The witches are instruments of evil, but they have not more power than to tempt Macbeth with the kingship prophecy. It is only he himself who can decide to choose evil.

In the beginning of the play Macbeth is absolutely moral and loyal to his king. The premonitions, nonetheless, awaken in him feelings of ambition, but also of doubt and denial. Once he has murdered, his suffering arises from his being unable to bear his acts. His inner war, both before and after committing the crime, shows the personal tragedy that Macbeth experiences. Guilt, lament and despaired brutality are Macbeth's sequels for murdering. Moreover, the suspicion he arouses by murdering Duncan, Banquo and Maduff's family is what makes his opponents defeat him, and therefore his fatal ending is caused by his decision of murder.

The thesis of this paper is that Macbeth does possess free will and it is because of his decisions that he not only falls, but creates his own tragedy. Being potentially good and evil, his tragedy goes beyond the fact of being defeated at the end of the play, for the reader witnesses his fall into madness as the result of his incapacity of reconciling his humanity with his vaulting ambition.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, Tragedy, Free Will, Potentiality, Evil, Renaissance Literature.

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0. Introduction

> "Had he been able to resist his own inclinations and the promptings of his wife, he would be of no more interest than any other successful general. Had he been able to kill without compunction, he would simply be one of our rarer monsters. But he is caught in the tension between his action and his reaction, and in his struggle and failure to reconcile irreconcilable conflicts, he assumes tragic dimensions."
>
> (McElroy, 1973: 237)

Macbeth is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, but it contains an endless list of themes and dilemmas that will always concern humanity. Among many others, there are the nature of good and evil, thirst for power, treason, free will or moral responsibility. Macbeth's psychology and the situation he faces are so complex that it makes the reader consider seriously Macbeth's freedom of action, leaving us doubting on whether to feel more pity for the murdered or for the murderer.

Although my reading of the play is not religious, it is impossible to analyze Macbeth's free will without taking into consideration the Catholic and the Protestant doctrines of free will. *Macbeth* was written during the reign of James I of England and Ireland and VI of Scotland. James I established the definite victory of Protestantism in England, and the emphasis on original sin, divine election and predestination became extremely influential not only in the English religious circles but also in the popular mindset. Protestantism asserted that Adam's original sin was inherited by any individual from the moment of conception, and that all humanity became potentially sinful because of his eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Moreover, according to John Calvin's doctrine of Predestination and Divine Election, Adam's fall, and any sinful human decision, had been previously planned by God because he had a greater plan for humanity. The 'elect' had been formerly predestined to act rightfully and to receive salvation, whereas the rest was predestined to sin and were therefore doomed to eternal damnation. Being the seemingly inevitable fall of Macbeth the center of the story, the play could be understood from an absolute Calvinist point of view: Macbeth would have been predestined to do evil and the witches would be the supernatural forces working for God's will of damnation.

However, many scholars have been sceptic about the 'dooming power' of the witches. Walter Clyde Curry pointed out that:

> In the mainstream of theology in Shakespeare's England, evil was both subjective and objective, existing both in the mind of man as a result of the Fall, and also in a whole realm of devils, imps, and spirits, whose existence was in no way dependent upon the human mind. The degree of their influence upon human actions, […], depended largely upon how a given individual was disposed at the time of temptation (Curry 1937, cited in McElroy 1973:212)

The supernatural elements of the play, the witches and their prophecies, are crucial, for the nature of their power determines to what an extent Macbeth has freedom of action. Critics such as Tufts, McElroy or Cheung have claimed the witches do not cause Macbeth's fall. They do, however, have the power of foreseeing the future, for all the premonitions they predict occur[1], but they cannot control or determine the protagonist's decisions or behavior. The three scholars mentioned above agree on the fact that the witches, being the embodiment of evil, can only tempt Macbeth with the prospect of being king. Once Macbeth is told he will be king, the alternative ways to kingship (waiting patiently or murdering Duncan) are left open in front of him.

Moreover, Shakespeare puts so much emphasis on Macbeth's self-division that it is hard to believe that he was doomed to choose evil from the beginning. Unlike most of the characters, who have either clearly *good* or *bad* intentions, Macbeth presents a great number of dualities. He has a moral and loyal side and an ambitious self; we perceive his good-natured humanity and, later, we witness his bloody, mad aggressiveness. Such duality and transformation apply perfectly to Thomas Aquinas's conception of *potentiality*, according to which human beings have the capacity of choosing between *good* and *evil*, and are, therefore, potentially good or bad beings depending on the actions they decide to perform. Furthermore, the insistence on feelings of guilt and lament remind of the Catholic view on moral responsibility for one's own actions. Such feelings drive Macbeth and Lady Macbeth literally mad, and are the result of the characters consciousness of their moral

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[1] Although the prophecy of Banquo's son becoming king does not take place in the play, we must understand that he will become so later on, for it was assumed that the audience knew that James I was a descendant of Banquo in the *Holinshed Chronicles*.

responsibility. Macbeth, then, is the tragedy of a man who was not evil in the beginning but who becomes so by choosing to do evil.

The play was inspired by the historical characters Macbeth, Macduff and Duncan of the *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1587). These chronicles, as Nicholas Brooks puts it, are "conscientious chronicles, but rarely critical of their material, much of which was mythical" (Brooks, 2008: 68). The chronicles are said to be motivated by the Stuarts' political interest, using the story of Macbeth "to provide the basis for the Stuart myth" (Brooks: 68). Therefore, its supernatural elements were used as a mean to form a "starting-point of a mythical genealogy which the Stuarts invented for themselves when they achieved monarchy in the fourteenth century" (Brooks: 68). In fact, the prophecy of Banquo's descendants as future kings is present in these chronicles, and there exists controversy on whether Shakespeare wrote the play in order to please James I, whose lineage links him genealogically with the historical character Banquo[2] of the chronicles. As regards to that, though, some scholars claim that "the choice of subject had far more to do with public interest, […], than with pleasing the King" (Brooks: 68), and that it was "motivated by the need to avoid censorship" (Brooks: 68).

The central conflict of the play is the extent to which Macbeth is free of committing murder, or just a predestined puppet of fate. In this paper I will argue that Macbeth exerts free will when choosing to murder Duncan, and that this decision causes his personal tragedy. In order to do so, I will organize the paper in four sections that follow the chronological order of the play.

The first section is devoted to the witches and their prophecies. In this section I explore the power and nature of the witches and their premonitions. The witches, who are the embodiment of evil in the play, want Macbeth to fall. However, they do not posses any kind of magic by which they

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[2] According to Brooks, in the *Holinshed Chronicles* "Banquo (who had no historical existence) was said to have been murdered by Macbeth (who had), but his son Fleance escaped to Wales". (Brooks, 2008: 28) In Wales, Fleance had a son, Walter, who fled to Scotland and "whose military success eventually won him the post of Royal Steward, the senior court official. [Walter's] post became hereditary, [and] was the historical founder of the family. Hence the name, which Holinshed spells 'Steward' throughout" (Brooks: 28).

can control Macbeth's behavior or decisions; rather, their tactic is limited to tempting Macbeth with the prediction of being king, hoping that he himself choses *foul* ways to kingship. The witches are aware that thirst for power can corrupt an individual, and they hope that Macbeth, by means of his free will, chooses to do evil. After this, I carefully analyze Macbeth's first reaction to the prophecies, claiming that from the beginning he is aware of the "ill", murderous impulses that they awaken in him, but at the same time he is conscious that he does not need to murder Duncan in order to become king: He has become Thane of Cawdor "without [his] stir" (I.iii.143), and so, he could have been king without having had to commit the crime. Finally, I consider the protagonists' haste and speculation over the crown as another evidence for their freedom of action and thinking. Additionally, I claim that committing murder is their Achilles heel, for it is precisely this crime which will destroy them: both because of the guilt they will have to endure and because it will cause the inevitable revolt of the opponents of their tyranny.

The second section focuses on the characters dual or non-dual nature: their good and/or evil psyche. I base my arguments on Thomas Aquinas's conception of humankind as being potentially good or evil, being this potentiality dependent on deciding to do either former or the latter. I also examine the contrast of Macbeth's divided self with the absolute inclination towards goodness of, for instance, Duncan, Malcolm or Macduff, or the clear disposition to evil of the witches and Lady Macbeth. The simple *good* or *bad* natures of these characters contrast with Macbeth's complexity, and Macbeth's possession of a nature which shows signs of both *goodness* and *badness* emphasizes his potentiality for both qualities. In this section I clarify that Macbeth has not a pain-enjoying evil self, but rather a speculative and ambitious side as opposed to a deeply moral and loyal self. Considering that Macbeth has potentiality for doing both good and evil, I claim that a part of the tragedy is based on his choosing evil in spite of being potentially good, being this the source of his torment. Therefore, another subsection considers the extreme perception of events (awareness), the feelings (guilt) and the mental state (madness) that his willed decision to murder. Macbeth's

awareness along the play is astonishing, for he is not only able to perceive the immorality of his actions but also the practical implications they have. Through Macbeth's awareness, Shakespeare is showing a character who rationally decides to murder, to do evil, for when Macbeth chooses to murder he is listening to his ambitious and speculative self. However, since Macbeth has a good-natured and moral side, guilt and madness arise inevitably in himself. His incapacity for reconciling his *other* self, the ambitious side, with his moral self, makes him feel terribly guilty and to have trobling hallucination. Guilt is caused by his awareness of being responsible of his actions, and of knowing that he could have (and had even considered) not murdering Duncan. The imagined dagger and Banquo's ghost are the product of the torture of his conscience. Lady Macbeth and Banquo also show a duality and suffer from the fact of discovering that they also are potentially good and evil, respectively.

Section three analyzes Macbeth's evil by describing the psychological steps he takes towards murder. The first stage considered is his *state of innocence*, where Macbeth is simply good and loyal and in no way shows signs of royal ambition. After the Weird Sisters tell him that he will be king, his ambition and will to power are awakened; this prospect makes him covet the crown, but at the same time he is aware that he can also become king by fair means. The next significative step takes place after Macbeth hears Malcolm's proclamation as Prince of Cumberland, which makes Macbeth's possessiveness for the crown go *in crescendo*. Macbeth self-convinces himself that if he does not murder Duncan, he will never be king. Although his morality stifles this thought and he goes through a process of denial, he finally decides to murder. However, it is by doing evil that he eventually turns evil: After the crime, Macbeth is desperately consumed by guilt. Murdering Duncan is an evil act, but Macbeth's turning a cold-blooded evil person takes place *after* this crime, and it is caused by his wish to preserve the crown and because he has *banalized* murder. Precisely because of this trivialization, he is able to kill without compunction: first, his friend Banquo, and secondly, Macduff's wife and children, who represented no kind of threat to his persona. Banquo's

murder, at least, could be “justified” by Macbeth’s fear of losing the crown, but the massacre of Macduff’s family is absolutely unjustifiable, and it is meant to show Macbeth’s complete descend to madness and conversion to evil.

In the fourth and last section I consider Macbeth’s free will as the actual originator of the tragedy. Here I claim that his decision of murdering unleashes the cause-effect chain of tragic events. Macbeth’s murdering Duncan provokes nothing but more murders and the inevitable revolt of those who oppose his tyrannic modus operandi. The second prophecies are again a foretelling of the future: The witches do not cause Macbeth’s death, they just foresee it. Even if these vaticinations are purposely misleading and confusing, the Weird Sisters have seen in the future that Macbeth will die in the hands of Macduff, of a man who is not “of woman born” (IV.i.94) and that he will be vanquished when “Great Birman Wood to high Dunsinan Hill shall come against him” (IV.i.109). Finally, the focus of attention turns to the protagonist personal tragedy, analyzing Macbeth’s lament-like speeches as being the result of his awareness of the fact that all the destruction has been caused by his free-willed decision of killing Duncan.

1. Fate and Will in *Macbeth*

1.1. The power of the Weird Sisters

The witches and their prophecies have been regarded as crucial aspects for Macbeth's tragedy. As Bernard McElroy suggests: "The problem that [the witches'] presence poses is central to the tragedy, for it involves the degree of freedom that Macbeth exercises in committing his succession of crimes" (McElroy, 1973: 211). Since Banquo calls them "instruments of Darkness" (I.iii.122), or directly "the devil" in "Can the devil speak true?" (I.iii.105), we can deduce that they are the supernatural embodiment of evil in the play. They, indeed, are malicious, but they do not exert any supernatural dark influence on Macbeth that makes him choose evil. Their power is limited to foreseeing the future, and although Macbeth's coronation is fixed in fate, he has free will to decide *how* he becomes king. In this respect, Bernard McElroy states that: "the play accepts a central paradox of Christian thought; though the future is foreknown, it is not fixed" (McElroy, 1973: 213).

The fact that the premonitions come true has made many scholars think that they cause Macbeth's fall. As Cheung suggests: "since the witches' words do come true, their prediction seems as ineluctable as fate; Macbeth seems destined to fulfill their prophecy" (Cheung, 1984: 431). Nonetheless, the witches only tell Macbeth that he will be king: "All hail Macbeth, that shall be King hereafter" (I.iii.50). They specify neither when nor how, and they tell him nothing about having to murder Duncan in order to ascend the throne. If we briefly compare the premonitions of *Macbeth* with those of the greek tragedy *Oedipus King*, we see that the ones in *Macbeth* are neutral, whereas the ones in *Oedipus King* are dooming. In fact, the witches tell Macbeth a positive piece of news, and the oracle tells Oedipus that he will commit parricide and incest. In other words, whereas Oedipus cannot escape from murder, Macbeth cannot escape from kingship: murder does not enter his fate equation. That he will be king is certain, but the means by which he accedes the throne depend on him. In this respect, Carol Tufts claims that: "Shakespeare […] grants human

responsibility in the choices made by a free will — the witches' prophecy, after all, is subject to interpretation: it only tells Macbeth that he will be king, not that he must murder Duncan" (Tufts, 1998: 174).

As already mentioned, the witches are malicious and want Macbeth to fall, but they can only tempt him with the prospect of kingship. They know people can easily become corrupted when it comes to power, and they want their motto "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.i.11) to apply to Macbeth, who is considered a loyal and "worthy gentleman" (I.ii.24) by everybody, specially Duncan. As spectators of Macbeth's will and psyche, the witches observe whether he chooses to do evil or not, wishing his choosing of evil and enjoying the suffering that the tension between his ambition and his morality causes on him. As regards this aspect, McElroy claims that:

> The witches are not instruments of a power that *causes* destruction and suffering; they are instruments of a power that *enjoys* destruction and suffering. […]. They do not cause Macbeth's fall; they do not even contribute much to it; rather, their most characteristic function is to exacerbate it, to revel in it, and profanely celebrate it: 'Show his eyes, and grieve his heart! / Come like shadows, so depart! (IV.i. 110-111) (McElroy, 1793: 213-4)

The reference to the sailor of *the Tiger* in Act I is key for understanding both their sinister pastime and their limited power. The First Witch explains the other witches that she will send winds and storms to the sailor. By saying: "Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed" (I.iii.24-5), the witch is implying that she cannot make the vessel sink, but she can daze the sailor and obstruct his way home by sending him bad weather for navigation, leaving him at the mercy of a violent sea storm. In the introduction to his Oxford's Words Classics edition of the play, Robert Brooks remarks that: "They [the witches] are actively malicious to the master *o'th' Tiger*, but have not the power to destroy him" (Brooks, 2010: 3).

Thus, the witches want the sailor to sink, and they amuse themselves by watching whether the sailor is strong enough to resist the tempest or not, enjoying his suffering and his torment. The sailor of The Tiger is a metaphor for Macbeth situation, and the sinking or the fall of each character is just a possibility that depends on themselves. In the sailor's case, it is his physical strength and

navigation skills what can save him, and in Macbeth's, it is his free will, his capacity to choose good instead of evil. Just as with the sailor, the witches cannot make Macbeth kill Duncan, or become a tyrant, but they can awaken his thirst for power and leave him at the mercy of his aroused ambition. Just as the sailor, before knowing his fate as king, Macbeth navigated 'in a calm and quiet sea'. He himself refers to his "seated heart" when he makes reference to the troubling thoughts that his knowing his future as king causes on him: "Why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image […] / make[s] my seated heart knock at my ribs […]?" (I.iii.135-7)

1.2. The first prophecies

Before knowing the prospect of being king, Macbeth gives no sign of royal ambition, let alone murdering his king. By telling Macbeth that he will be king, the witches awaken not only his ambition but also his awareness of free will. Macbeth realizes that he can choose either to murder or not to act at all in order to become king: When Ross informs Macbeth that he is Thane of Cawdor, which proves to Macbeth the validity of the premonitions, Macbeth privately realizes that the "supernatural soliciting" has made him think of "that suggestion" which is a "murder [that] is yet but fantastical" (I.iii.136-140). Just after this thought, though, he resolves that his accession to the throne does not necessarily imply his doing anything: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (I.iii.144). Certainly, he is proclaimed Thane of Cawdor without his stir, just as he could have reached the crown had he not murdered Duncan. Thus, Macbeth was aware of the fact that he could either wait patiently for a legitimate coronation or take the throne by violent means[3]; as Catherine G. Martin puts it, he "might well have fulfilled the witches' prophecy by legitimate means" (Martin, 2016: 181), and since Macbeth becomes Thane of Cawdor without having attempted to be so, the logic of the premonitions could be based on the fact that they occur without the protagonist's active involvement in its fulfillment, by which we can deduce that

[3] The former is as physically possible and feasible as the latter: both king Duncan and Prince Malcolm might have died in war, in a fire, due to an incurable disease, etc, and Macbeth would have gained the throne because of his military merits.

Macbeth would have been king regardless of his actions. Then, even if Macbeth had done nothing to become king, he would have been crowned at some point of his life.

Banquo deduces the ambitious effect that the awareness of being king may have on Macbeth, and warns him by saying: “That trusted home / Might yet enkindle you unto the crown, / Besides the Thane of Cawdor” (I.iii.121-122). Moreover, Banquo is also told a prophecy that could make him covet the crown, but he does nothing to make their sons become kings. As regards to this, Cheung suggests that: “The witches cannot be held responsible for Macbeth’s evil decision. Though greeted by the same weird sisters, Banquo refuses to succumb to their temptation” (Cheung, 1984: 431).

The prophecies, in addition, are subject to Macbeth’s will and interpretation, which is seen in the fact that he is very selective in the prophecies he pays attention to. As McElroy remarks, Macbeth “defers recognition of all that does not immediately suit his bent of mind” (McElroy, 1973: 214). This implies that Macbeth listens to and enthuses over the premonitions he fancies: The prospect of being king amazes him so much that he ignores or even forgets the prediction of Banquo’s sons, which so much will anguish him after he murders Duncan. He is, then, a victim of the wishes of his will, not of having being fated to be king.

Furthermore, Macbeth consciously acknowledges the immorality of killing Duncan, and he even decides not to do it. In Act I we see how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are deciding and discussing whether or not murdering Duncan. Macbeth, at first, decides to “proceed no further in this business” (I.vii.31), although his ambition makes him finally cede to his wishes and to his wife promptings. This capacity for abstraction on one’s decisions, considering both his doubting, his moments of denial and his later resolution, proves to what an extent Macbeth is aware of *what* he is choosing and that *he* is choosing it. Macbeth, then, was “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Paradise Lost: 3.99).

1.3. Taking shortcuts to the throne: Macbeth's haste and speculation

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth react to the premonitions with haste and speculation. Considering that Macbeth would have being king even if he had not murdered the king, his decision of killing Duncan is nothing but precipitate. Haste for the crown is Macbeth's Achilles heel, and scholars such as Tonny Tanner notice this significance of haste in *Macbeth*: "The play is marked by extraordinary haste. […] We speak of things coming 'thick and fast' and that is exactly right for this play" (Tanner, 2010: 557). Haste is crucial, for it is one of the triggers of Macbeth's downfall. The first time it is expressed by the protagonists' words takes place when Lady Macbeth receives the letter that informs her of the royal prospect. She says: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promis'd; yet do I fear thy nature, / It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness, / To catch the nearest way" (I.v.14-15). Lady Macbeth's expression of "catch[ing] the nearest way" shows a clear the relationship between Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's free will and their haste. First of all, Lady Macbeth says that Macbeth "shalt be / What [he] [is] promised" (14), which entails that she knows that Macbeth will be king at one point or another of his life, without the need of murdering the king. "Yet", she goes on, she wants him to "catch the nearest way"(15), that is, the shortest way, which involves the immediate death of Duncan. Therefore, with her wish "to catch the nearest way"(15), Lady Macbeth is implying that they are aware of the fact that there are alternative ways to kingship, but still she wants to be queen in the shortest period of time possible.

Other instances in which haste is explicitly shown is in Macbeth's blatant speculation on killing Duncan:

> If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly; if the assassination / Could trammel up the consequence, and catch / With his surcease, success, that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all — here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump the life to come (I.vii.1-7)

The murder has to be "done quickly": This paragraph expresses Macbeth's hurry, his wish to "catch the nearest way" (I.v.15). The assassination is, for Macbeth, a shortcut to the throne, and

Macbeth wishes that Duncan's murder were a definitive action that would assure him the crown, making the crime "the be-all and the end-all here" (6). The conditional sentence "if the assassination / Could trammel up the consequence" (3) reveals that he views Duncan's death as a shortcut to his coronation. This calculating thinking shows that Macbeth considers murder rationally and speculatively, and that he is therefore consciously choosing evil. In fact, when he hears Duncan proclaiming Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, he thinks: "This is a step / On which I must fall down or else o'er-leap […] The eye wink at the hand—yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (I.iv.50-52). These words show to what an extent Macbeth is able to manipulate himself, to push aside his moral thoughts: The "eye" represents his morality and the "hand" symbolises his ambition. His morality fears the deed, for which "the eye wink at the hand—yet let that be" (50) is a way to say, as Brooks puts it, "let the eye not see what the hand is doing" (Brooks, 2008: 110).

In the play, haste and speculation are perceived negatively by the characters that represent *goodness*, and their remarks seem to describe the triggers of Macbeth's fall. A correlation between haste and treachery is made, for instance, when captain Ross meets Duncan, Malcolm and Lennox in a military camp in Act I. Lennox says: "What a haste looks through his eyes! So should he look That seems to speak things strange" (I.ii.46-47). These "things strange" stand for treachery, for Ross informs Duncan the old Thane of Cawdor has betrayed them. The very words "things strange" reappear reversed in Macbeth's hasty thoughts: "Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned" (III.iv.140-1). In Act V, when Macduff, Malcolm or Seyward are discussing the mentality that should be adopted in military life, their observations seem to refer directly to Macbeth's speculative thinking: "Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate" (V.iv.19), and Macduff's reflection on intemperance reminds of Macbeth's haste and vaulting ambition: "Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny; it hath been / The untimely emptying of the happy throne, / And fall of many kings" (IV.iii.65-8). Such affirmation

also seems to be an insinuation that Macbeth could have had a *happy throne* had he waited patiently for the crown. Macbeth himself acknowledges that "[he] [has] no spur / To prick the sides of [his] intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other" (I.vii. 25-26), and such is his haste for the crown that he forgets to think of the prophecy of Banquo's sons, which so much will torment him after murdering Duncan. Then, his hurry for the crown disrupts the moral order in *Macbeth* and triggers his personal tragedy: if he had not killed Duncan, he would neither have murdered Banquo and Macduff's family nor have raised suspicions and rejection on his person, and the whole nation would not have organized a revolt to destroy him for his tyranny.

2. Good and Evil Nature in *Macbeth*

2.1. The Tragedy of Conscience: Macbeth's Awareness and Guilt

Macbeth shows a deep sense of awareness throughout the play, not only of moral awareness, but also of the meaning and the possible outcome of his actions. For example, he logically considers that the prospect of being king is in itself neither good nor bad: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (I.iii.131-2), and discovers that its *wrongness* depends on the "horrible imaginings" (I.iii.139) that cross his mind. As stated in section 1, Macbeth is also aware that, even if he had done nothing for being king, chance would have crowned him. His speculation on "catch[ing] the nearest way" (I.v.15) and "trammel[ing] up the consequence" (I.vii.33-34) also shows that he is deeply conscious that, with his actions, he can change the course of events and fulfill without delay his royal desire. Macbeth is even able to deduce what will ultimately happen in the play: "[…] we but teach / Bloody instructions, which being taught, return / To plague the inventor" (I.vii.8-10). It is no coincidence that his absolute awareness and his sense of fear towards the thought of murder have been so emphasized in the very act preceding the assassination: Shakespeare is showing Macbeth's consciousness, its richness in logical thinking, in order to tell us that since he was aware of the implications of the deed, he was free of choosing to do it.

As regards Macbeth's sense of awareness, McElroy claims that: "self-awareness is one of the hallmarks of the Shakespearean tragic hero, and in Macbeth's case, it is the very essence of his tragedy" (McElroy, 1973: 217). Certainly, Macbeth feels so much guilt precisely because he is extremely aware of the freedom he possesses when he chooses to murder. His repentance, then, lies on the fact of being conscious not only of the wrongness of the deed, but also that he consciously decided to do it, and that he could have not done it. In the very act following Duncan's murder, Macbeth is already regretting it and wishing that the knocking at the door would "Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou / couldst" (II.ii.72). When, after the assassination, Macbeth comes back to their chamber, the way in which Macbeth expresses to Lady Macbeth his feelings towards

the deed os equally painful: “This is a sorry sight” (II.ii.18) and, almost in an infant-like desolate voice, Macbeth desperately asks her: “But wherefore could I not pronounce ‘Amen’? / I had most need of blessing, and ‘Amen’ / Stuck in my throat” (II.ii.31-32).

Although guilt is Macbeth’s first reaction to the crime, madness is the most significant sequel of murdering for him. Such is the intensity and the trouble that murdering causes on him, that his mental health is unable to bear it. Macbeth can rationally decide to murder Duncan, but he cannot rationally kill him: The very man who reasonably resolved “I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (I.vii.80-1) hallucinates a “false creation”, an imaginative dagger, pointing at the direction that his ambitious self directs him. The imaginative dagger, in fact, is caused by his fever[4], and this fever is provoked by his morality, which rejects the crime; or, in other words, murdering clashes so much with his morality and his values that he has a fever that makes him hallucinate the dagger. Such is the helpless state of fear towards the deed he is about to commit, that he himself recognizes that he must murder Duncan without dwelling on it because, otherwise, “words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives” (II.i.62).

Madness and guilt profoundly blend in the very scene following the murder, where Macbeth explains Lady Macbeth that he heard voices while he was killing Duncan:

> There’s one did laugh in sleep, / and one cried ‘Murder’, that they did wake each other / […] Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more; / Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep […]’, / Still cried ‘Sleep no more’ to all the house: / ‘Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more’ (II.ii.41)

Hearing voices is usually associated to mental disorders and, in Macbeth’s case, it is the insane mental reaction created by his conscience. Since Macbeth has a good-natured side, “he [Macbeth] faces the characteristic problem of the Shakespearean tragic hero, how to endure what is, for him, simply unbearable” (McElroy, 1973: 228). Just as the voices, Banquo’s ghost is also a product of his mind and the result of his conscience. Logically speaking, Macbeth has no reason

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[4] Nicholas Brooke backs the idea that the hallucinated dagger is the product of Macbeth’s fever. He suggests that “this kind of optical illusion is well known, especially in feverish conditions — the brain registers as sight what is not directly stimulated by optic nerve” (Brooks, 2008: 4)

why to fear Banquo, for it is Fleance who flees the hired killers and who might take the crown or simply revenge his father. Then, Banquo's ghost cannot be generated by a feeling of fear towards Banquo, but by Macbeth's tormented conscience. He says to the ghost: "quit my sight, […] / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou glare with" (III.iv.95-96). Banquo's disdainful glare has indeed "no speculation", but it has moral judgment, and this judgment is of Macbeth himself. Macbeth is, literally, judging himself through Banquo's image. According to Kastan, "Shakespeare's tragedies witness the horror and mystery of human suffering" (Kastan, 2006: 9), and in *Macbeth* we witness the intricate cause of the protagonist's suffering: a guilt and madness caused by the awareness of having chosen evil in spite of having a deep sense of morality.

2.2. The Potentiality of Good and Evil Natures

In *Macbeth* there is a clear Manichean opposition between characters that represent *goodness* and characters who embody *evil*. The former group is composed of Duncan, Malcolm, Macduff, Lennox, Ross, Seyward and his son, and the latter is embodied by the witches and by Lady Macbeth[5]. The psychological flatness of the these characters is done intentionally, for their function in the play is representing forces of either evil or goodness. Duncan, for instance, "has not merely been a good and 'gracious' king (III,i.65), he has also been a 'most sainted one as well' (IV.iii.109)" (Tufts, 1998: 172). Even Macbeth, before knowing his future as king, shows no sings of evil or ambition, and would be classified into the category of *good*-natured characters. Cheung observes that, when Macbeth is told he will be king, he perceives his thought of murder as something alien to his nature:

> Macbeth has read into the witches' prophecy an unutterable 'suggestion' -- surprising him from without — to which he must 'yield'. Likewise 'horrid image' is presented as something outside which wreaks havoc in him '[a]gainst the use of nature' and alien to his nature (Cheung, 1984: 433).

The fact that, at the beginning of the play, thinking of committing murder is "alien to his nature" (Cheung, 433) is key because it shows that Macbeth has a *good* nature in the beginning but

[5] Lady Macbeth shows feelings of guilt after the murder of Macduff's wife and son, so her representation of total evil is just valid before that crime.

has the potentiality of having an evil one. After the crime, Macbeth significantly says: “To know my deed, ‘twere best not know myself” (II.ii.72-73), which demonstrates that he unable to reconcile the crime he has committed with the part of his nature which is *good* and loyal. In act one, Lady Macbeth herself recognizes that Macbeth is “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness” (I.v.17) to kill Duncan, and she perfectly describes her husband’s self-division between his loyal self and his ambitious side:

> Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'dst have, great / Glamis, / That which cries, "Thus thou must do, if thou have it; / And that which rather thou dost fear to do / Than wishest should be undone (I.v.18-21)

Before knowing he would be king, Macbeth is the embodiment of pure loyalty, and it is he himself who bravely fights to defeat the Scottish traitor Macdonwald. Many critics have considered that Macbeth’s initial loyalty and morality is meant to stress that he had the potentiality of not becoming a traitor, of continuing being *good* and loyal, and this is precisely what makes *Macbeth* a tragedy:

> Wayne C. Booth argues that at the beginning of *Macbeth* Shakespeare uses ‘testimony of the liveliest possible kind to establish Macbeth’s prior goodness,’ and that Macbeth’s ‘crimes are thus built upon our knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness’ (Booth 1968, cited in Stachniewski 1988:184).

Even when Macbeth speculates on murdering Duncan, there are many instances in which his moral side rejects doing it, for instance when he discusses the matter with Lady Macbeth and declares: “We will proceed no further in this business” (I.vii.31) or “Prithee peace: / I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none” (I.vii.45-7). McElroy describes Macbeth’s attitude towards murder like a mixture between “attraction and repulsion” (McElroy, 1973: 220), but his repulsion, he goes on, “springs from the deeply moral side of his nature” (McElroy: 220). Stachniewski identifies that Macbeth’s initial goodness and his moral doubts contrast with and Calvin’s definition of human nature:

> A conflict between Calvin’s views and what we find in the play might, […], be seen to lie in the idea of nature entertained by each. Calvin regards man’s nature as totally depraved: ‘it is in vaine,’ he said, ‘to seke for any good thing in our nature’ (*Inst. II.iii.2).* Yet Macbeth’s heart knocks at his

> ribs 'against the use of nature.' Later his 'pester'd senses… recoild and start' (V.ii.23) […] Lady Macbeth, moreover, fears his 'nature', which is too full of the milk of human kindness' (I.v.16-17) (Stachniewski, 1988: 173).

Macbeth realizes his double nature once his ambition, his will to power, is awakened, and from this moment on he will be divided between his two natures. Critics such as Catherine G. Martin have observed the radical change of Macbeth's nature claiming that after Duncan's murder he "represents an "absolute contrast" to the man who at first seemed "the very definition of the man of fortitude given by the moral philosophers" (Gimelli, 2016: 184).

Thus, Macbeth is not a naturally evil character, and he becomes evil inasmuch as he has the potentiality for doing evil. On this point, Tufts asserts that: "[…] unlike Duncan, [Macbeth] is not 'most sainted', not perfectly good, but rather, like most human beings, he is good insofar as he exists, insofar as he possesses the potentiality, the capacity for being, which enables him to act at all" (Tufts, 1998: 176). Even Malcolm, in Act Four, acknowledges human potentiality: In this act he puts Macduff's loyalty to the test, and when Macduff argues "I am not treacherous" (IV.iii.17), Malcolm answers "But Macbeth is. / A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge" (IV.iii.18-20). Macbeth's fall has shown Malcolm that even *good* natures have the potentiality of becoming evil, treacherous ones.

Many scholars have signaled the significance of potentiality in *Macbeth*. McElroy stated that: "What Shakespeare was dramatizing was a potentiality of the human condition, in this case a most grim potentiality, but as true in its context as in any other embodied in his dramas" (McElroy, 1973: 237), and Carol Tufts claimed that: "[Shakespeare] may, in fact, be giving concrete, dramatic life to the metaphysical conception of good and evil that was part of his inheritance from the medieval scholastic philosophers" (Tufts, 1998: 169). The play presents this moral potentiality for good and evil as very vulnerable and volatile from the beginning with the witches' sentence: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.i.95), which expresses that anyone can become corrupted, that the most *fair* character can become *foul* when facing a particular situation, and vice versa.

Macbeth is not the only character who experiences the tension between his duality. Banquo is undoubtedly part of the group representing *goodness*, but his identification with *goodness* is so strong that he can only be aware of his subconscious impulsiveness and potential evil nature through his dreams. In Act II, Banquo admits that he refuses to sleep because he has "cursed thoughts" in his dreams: "A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep; merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose" (II.i. 7-9). The "cursed thoughts" may perfectly be the thought of murdering Duncan, and Banquo's having this thoughts shows that the prophecies have also awakened his ambitious, violent impulses — his *other* potential nature —. What is more, Banquo's rejection of these thoughts proves that the characters' actions depend on their conscious decisions, and that the witches exert no magical force which controls their behavior. In fact, critics such as Tufts view "the witches […] as the embodiment of Aquinas's idea of potentiality. What they prophecy is linked to the kind of choice made by the human actors who hear them, […], as in Banquo's decision to 'stand' within 'the great hand of God' (II.iii.130), and Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan" (Tufts, 1998: 173).

Even Lady Macbeth, who seems the most clear representation of evil in the beginning of the play, painfully discovers her good nature after the murder of Macduff's family, for the guilt it causes on her drives her literally mad. Act V shows her convulsive cleaning of her hands, trying to clean a guilt she cannot bear: "The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is / she now? — What, will these hands ne'er be clean?"(V.i.40-1).

Shakespeare seems to be stressing the complexity of human psychology: Macbeth is divided into two strong forces that push him into opposite directions, and choosing the morally wrong one torments him because it clashes with the values of his moral self. McElroy endorses this idea as follows: "Had [Macbeth] been able to kill without compunction, he would simply be one of our rarer monsters. But he is caught in the tension between his action and his reaction, and in his struggle and failure to reconcile irreconcilable conflicts, he assumes tragic dimensions" (McElroy,

1973: 237). The excuse Macbeth gives in act two for having killed Duncan's bodyguards seems to be referring to his own psychological conflict: "Who can be wise, amazed, temp'rate, and furious, / Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man" (II.iii.110).

3. Macbeth's Psychological Steps towards Evil

3.1. The State of Innocence

Before knowing that he would be king, Macbeth was in a 'state of innocence' similar to that of Adam and Eve in *The Book of Genesis*. In this stage, Macbeth's nature paralleled those of the characters who represent total *goodness* in the play: he was a loyal soldier who fought for his king without any treacherous impulse. Catherine G. Martin establishes Macbeth's initial state with Satan's in *Paradise Lost*, claiming that: "Both characters [Satan and Macbeth] participated in a state of empowered equilibrium with their hereditary monarchs, whose beneficence and universally recognized right to rule left them little movement or even opportunity to rebel." (Martin, 2016: 181) In this phase, Macbeth was unaware of the potentiality of his power simply because no one had *suggested* him how powerful he could be. Duncan is, for him, a God-like[6] figure and Macbeth accepts the "limits and boundaries" of Duncan's realm, "which cannot under any circumstance be transgressed" (McElroy, 1973: 219).

3.2. Opening new paths

The prospect of being king makes Macbeth "whet his appetite for the crown" (McElroy, 1973: 214), but it also makes him aware that he can reach the crown by different means. The possibility of choosing both scares and amazes Macbeth because he is aware of the implications and possible consequences, good and bad, that each decision entails. Killing Duncan has the disadvantage of being immoral, but the advantage of acceding the throne the moment he decides to take the king's life. Contrarily, letting "chance" crown him has the benefit of not being immoral, but it entails having to wait an unknown period of time: maybe days, years or even decades. Then, although the thought of murder crosses his mind, his initial resolution is to let fate crown him without his intervention.

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[6] In Shakespeare's times, the power of the king was believed to come directly from God, and the whole social order was endorsed by the latter. Therefore, the murder of the king in *Macbeth* is perceived as an unnatural deed, affecting the order of nature itself.

The royal prospect, though, also makes Macbeth and his wife distance from their *innocent* selves and start seeing themselves as king and queen. As seen in section 1.3, Macbeth keeps a distance away from his *good* and loyal side in order to speculate on the shortest way to kingship. Catherine G. Martin describes this new self-perception as follows: "[Lady Macbeth] and her husband desperately cling to identities divorced from their 'social area and function by entertaining a personal fantasy for the future' by abandoning "this bank and shoal of time" (I.vii.6)" (Martin, 2016: 194). Macbeth's new self-perception is seen just after Ross informs him that he is already Thane of Cawdor, when he utters a sentence full of delusions of *grandeur*: "Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (I.iii.129). Although Macbeth has mentally savored the crown, his morality still is able to stifle his murderous impulses. At this point, Macbeth's will is divided between impulsion and repulsion towards the act of murdering, and "even when he conceived 'fantastical' horrors, he realized they were 'nothings' with no fatal consequences as yet" (Martin, 2016: 192).

3.3 Persuading himself that he has no choice

Macbeth's temperance takes a radical turn when he hears Duncan proclaiming Malcolm Prince of Cumberland. He perceives Malcolm's proclamation as a decisive threat that implies never acceding the throne himself. Although he goes through a great number of moments of doubt, Macbeth has subconsciously made a very relevant psychological step towards murder: "Through a clearly chosen will-to-power, [he] begin[s] to shrink in social stature by clinging to a self-imposed delusion that [he] ha[s] no choices, that [his] only alternatives are 'slavery' or rebellion, which […] is patently untrue"(Martin, 2016: 181). This can be noticed by comparing the different ways with which Macbeth perceives his own impulses as regards the thought of murder Up to that moment, his "horrible imaginings"(I.iii.139) were absolutely disturbing for him, and he tried to suppress them as soon as they crossed his mind. After Malcolm's proclamation, nonetheless, he consciously approves murder:

> The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, / For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires, / The eye wink at the hand — yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see (I.iv.50-54)

Perceiving Malcolm as a decisive obstacle makes his will for the crown turn radically possessive and aggressive, to the extent of self-persuading himself with the idea that he has no choice but murder, as if external factors were the causal agents that force him into crime. Catherine G. Martin wittily described this particular thinking of Macbeth as "childlike heteronomy" (Martin, 2016: 181) and "reductive solipsism" (Martin: 181). Although at this stage his moral self can still suffocate his decision to murder, his fear of not being king is gaining ground on the drive of his will.

3.4. Choosing to do evil in spite of conscience

The insistence in the protagonist's extreme awareness, moral dilemma and instances of doubt as regards the murder are meant to make the audience aware that Macbeth is conscious of the immorality of killing Duncan and, even so, Macbeth still decides to murder him. From a Christian point of view, Macbeth is following all the steps related to sinning consciously:

> "[…] in taking the standard Christian approach, Robert F. Fleissner shows that the original audience of Macbeth would readily have perceived that before he commits his crime, he completes all the steps traditionally associated with mortal sin: "(1) recogniz[ing] the seriousness of his crime-to-be, (2) re-flect[ing] on it sufficiently, but then (3) willfully proceed[ing] to commit it regardless" (Fleissner 1986, cited in Martin 2016:186-7).

Although mentally tormented by fear and doubt, Macbeth shows a logical and rational thinking as regards the crime. Macbeth's awareness on the immorality of his murder-to-be, his speculation on its consequences, and the fact that he finally murders in spite of his conscience demonstrates that "real evil only comes into existence through conscious, rational choice, which makes reason and choice virtually the same thing." (Martin: 186-7) He, basically, pushes away his moral thoughts to fulfill the wish of his ambition.

3.5. Turning evil by doing evil

Before his first assassination, Macbeth shuddered at the thought of committing murder. Although his choice to do it was speculative and rational, the performance was painful and mentally troubling for him, and there is a marked change in Macbeth after he commits the crime: Murdering Duncan changes him, it turns him, by force, a cold-blooded and selfish person; when he is planning to kill Banquo and Fleance, he literally says: "For mine own good, / all causes shall give way" (III.iv.135).

Macbeth does not become evil until he does evil, and although all his crimes are evil acts, Macbeth becomes really evil *after* he has murdered Duncan. From that point on, the *way* he murders changes drastically. In this respect, R. A. Foakes claimed that: "the murder of Duncan was the equivalent in mountaineering terms of scalling Everest, and after this [Macbeth] has no trouble with lower hills" (Foakes 1982, cited in Reid 1991: 180). Thus, being capable to murder once enables him to commit more murders without the grievance that so much restrained him before. In this respect, McElroy states that what terrifies Macbeth the most after Duncan's murder is "not the deed itself" or "the fear of being caught", but rather "the full realization of what his action has done to him" (McElroy, 1973: 228). Macbeth literally says: "I am afraid to think of what I have done; / Look on't again, I dare not" (II.ii.50-51). According to McElroy, Macbeth is not that afraid *of what* he has done, but *to think of* what he has done *to himself*: He seems to be aware of the way this murder has changed himself, of the values he has destroyed and the mental peace he has ruined. His attempt to take Fleance's life and the murder of Banquo could be explained as despaired acts to keep the crown, but Lady Macduff and her child entailed no threat to Macbeth. Even if Macbeth's intention was intimidating Macduff, the murder of this woman and child is gratuitous, and is meant to show Macbeth's complete conversion to evil.

It is, then, his action and the mental sequels it provokes what makes him trivialize murder, turning him cold-blooded and evil. Macbeth's turning evil by means of his actions proves the idea

of potentiality, and contrasts greatly with the Calvinist conception that "evil is not the product of the autonomous human mind" (Stachiniewski, 1988: 171). By means of the mental shift that having committed murder causes on Macbeth, Shakespeare is showing that evil is the product of autonomous human mind, for his free-willed decision and action of murder is what turns him cold-blooded and capable to kill without compunction. Murdering Duncan, then, not only implies disrupting the moral order of the world, but Macbeth's world itself. It has made him change from being *good*-natured and loyal to being able to murder effortlessly and cold-bloodedly.

However, it is not only having trivialized murder or his despair for maintaining the crown what provokes Macbeth's subsequent crimes. Murdering Duncan has supposed a radical cut from his previous life, and he desperately needs to make this cut meaningful: "for the sight of Banquo's crowned progeny enjoying the fruits for which he has lost everything of real importance to him forces Macbeth to confront the futility of all his actions […]. In the face of this, his will to act is increased to almost manic intensity" (McElroy, 1973: 234). Once he has murdered, Macbeth's will and despair go in crescendo, with the only objective of making meaningful the free-willed acts that have 'stolen' his former, peaceful life. As McElroy puts it: "It is a terrible self-awareness with which to live, and the knowledge that he has sacrificed everything to gain 'nothing' makes it intolerable" (McElroy, 1973: 230).

4. Free-Willed Decisions as the Originators of the Tragedy

4.1. The cause-effect tragedy

Macbeth's decision of murdering Duncan unleashes the subsequent events in a cause-effect way. Killing Duncan is not "the be-all and the end-all here"(I.vii.5), as Macbeth would have liked, but only the beginning of his tragedy. As seen in section 2, Macbeth's tragedy is in part enduring the pain caused by committing and becoming evil despite having a moral/good self, but the tragedy also consists in the fact that it is Macbeth and Lady Macbeth themselves who, by murdering Duncan, indirectly kill themselves.

First of all, after murdering Duncan, Macbeth fears having killed Duncan for Banquo's lineage advantage, and also fears Banquo or Fleance might attempt to take the throne by violent means, just as he did. Once again, Macbeth interprets the prophecies the way he wants: The witches only foresaw that "[Banquo] shalt get kings" (I.iii.66), not that they would usurp him the throne while he was reigning. Macbeth could have reigned for a considerable period of time, have died afterwards by illness, senescence or in a war, and then Fleance could have acceded the throne. It is, then, his interpretation of Banquo's prophecy and his will to maintain the throne what pushes him deeper into violence.

Moreover, murdering the king also provokes the revolt that will defeat finally Macbeth. Macbeth's murder arouses suspicions. Banquo immediately suspected that Macbeth "played'st most fully for it" (III.i.44) and Macduff's distrust is seen in his refusal to go to Macbeth's coronation. In the very coronation, Macbeth betrays himself with the scene he makes in front of the whole court when he sees Banquo's ghost, and even the doctor who sees Lady Macbeth is aware of the "foul whisp'rings [that] are abroad" (V.i.69). Then, Duncan's murder causes suspicion, and it is this suspicion which inevitably causes the revolt of the opponents of Macbeth's tyranny and his subsequent defeat and execution.

4.2. The second premonitions

With the second prophecies, the witches do not doom Macbeth to die in the sense of creating a tragic fate for him. These vaticinations are just what the witches have foreseen in the future, and this future would not have existed had Macbeth not killed the king. Macbeth himself, then, causes the second premonitions, the future, to be the way they are.

Once again, then, the witches limit themselves to use their only power: foreseeing the future; and this future is that Macbeth will die in the hands of Macduff. The witches' misleading premonitions only serve to mock[7] Macbeth, to make him suffer a little bit more and to laugh at his thought of being invincible, when in reality they know he will die. They could have told him directly that Macduff would overthrow him in battle, and that he would be defeated when the English army came to Dunsinan Hill using branches of Birman Wood as camouflage. Nonetheless, they tell him: "Beware Macduff. Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me, enough" (IV.i.85), "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth"(95) and "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birman Wood to high Dunsinan Hill / Shall come against him" (105-108). The fact that Macbeth murders Macduff's family only intensifies the anger of the latter, but he would have killed Macbeth anyway. Before being informed by Ross of the murder of his wife and children, Macduff is already firmly resolved to "[…] hold fast the mortal sword—and like good men, bestride our downfall birthdom" (IV.ii.3-4).

The prophecy of Macbeth's death is out of reach of his free will or freedom to decide. In this regard, McElroy suggests that: "Macbeth had free will to begin with, but appears to have forfeited it after the crime. […] As he himself realizes, [he] does drastically circumscribe his range of possible choices after he commits regicide" (McElroy, 1973: 212). With the second set of prophecies, Macbeth is not facing a choice or moral dilemma in which he has to actively decide between good

[7] This claim could be put into question considering that Hecate's words in act III scene V, for she says "This night I'll spend unto a dismal, and fatal end" (III.v.20). Although the "strength of [the prophecies'] illusion" (III.v.29) makes Macbeth overestimate his strength, this overestimation is not what causes his death. In fact, this scene is said to not be Shakespeare's, and many modern representations omit this scene.

or evil, in which he has freedom of action. Macbeth is now the object, and not the subject, of murder; and the irony of the play is that it has been Macbeth himself who has created his tragic fate, for no revolt against him would have arisen if he had not decided to murder Duncan.

4.3. A personal tragedy

As Tufts asserts, "[…] natural harmony, though disrupted by Macbeth's willed choice of evil, is, according to critical consensus, restored at the end of the play with the triumph of the forces of good." (Tufts, 1998: 169) However, *Macbeth* is not a tragedy because of Scotland's disruption of moral order, but because of "what happens through the hero" (Kastan, 2006: 14), that is, the torment Macbeth goes through for being aware that it is he himself who has made things happen the way they have, as well as the guilt and mental breakdown he suffers. Raymond Williams claimed that "Shakespeare's tragedies offer little optimism about what meanings are reaffirmed and restored" (Williams 1998, cited in Kastan 1998:14) and Kastan emphasized that "Shakespeare, […], is less interested in what survives the tragic agon than it suggests" (Kastan: 14). In *Macbeth*, then, the tragedy consists in the torment Macbeth puts himself into by his willed choice of murder, not on Scotland's disruption and restoration of moral order; this latter reading of the play would make *Macbeth* simply a "moral and political romance" (Kastan, 2006: 16).

It is very significant that, even before Macbeth knows that he is defeated, (before he sees the Birman Wood approaching his castle or before he comes to know that Macduff is not 'born of a woman'), Macbeth shows unhappiness with the *way* he has made things occur. His expressions of lament show this awareness:

> Seyton! — I am sick at heart / When I behold — Seyton, I say! — This push / Will chair me ever or disseat me now. / I have liv'd long enough: my way of life / Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf, / And that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have — but, in their stead, curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath / Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.— / Seyton?" (V.iii.20-27)

Macbeth is "sick at heart, when [he] behold[s]" the situation and the alienation he has put himself in. Referring to Macbeth's unfinished sentence " I am sick at heart / When I behold—" (20),

McElroy claims that: “clearly what Macbeth beholds all through these scenes is himself” (McElroy, 1973: 235). This speech of lament represents the tragedy that supposes for him having lost his former life and being aware that he himself has occasioned his personal tragedy. He is a young man, and yet he feels old: “I have liv'd long enough: my way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, [like] the yellow leaf” (V.iii.21-22). Also, he bitterly acknowledges that he has destructed the values and aspects which a part of himself cared about: “that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have” (23-24). His “poor heart would fain deny” (25) the *way* he has become king and the consequences it has caused. Considering that a side of him is loyal and moral, his despair stems from his realization that what he has lost and what he has become are the result of his decision of murder, which McElroy remarks as follows:

> To have a passionately held, demonstrably valid vision of the world, and yet to be cut from it by one’s own actions, to be hated and cursed by all humanity, to have to struggle against one’s own most deeply felt emotions, and to be *aware* of all this with perfect, unblinking clarity, is surely the most harrowing vision of human isolation that has ever been realized in drama (McElroy, 1973: 236).

Macbeth’s awareness of his free-willed actions rises again in Act V, when he is informed that his wife is dead, and he says: “She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word” (V.v.18) His use of the conditional tense is crucial, for it shows Macbeth cognizance that Lady Macbeth would not had died so soon if they had not “[caught] the nearest way”(I.v.17), that is, if they had not murdered Duncan. In the end of the play, as McElroy suggests, “we are so absorbed in Macbeth’s private conflict that his death and the triumph of unimpressive right is almost incidental to the tragedy” (McElroy, 1973: 235).

Macbeth’s awareness makes us consider seriously his words in the act following Duncan’s murder, where Macduff, Donalbain and Banquo, among others, discover that Duncan has been murdered. Here, seemingly to avoid suspicion, Macbeth says:

> Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant / There's nothing serious in mortality — / All is but toys: renown and grace is dead, / The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of (II.iii.93-98)

Either Macbeth is a genius at acting (for, after all, he needs to act in order to avoid suspicion), or he is already suffering from having betrayed his moral self, intuiting that his action will trigger his personal tragedy.

5. Conclusions

This paper has been built around the thesis statement that Macbeth possesses free will and rationally decides to murder king Duncan, being this free-willed decision what triggers his personal tragedy. Macbeth destroys himself in a double sense: First, because he is a potentially *good* individual who betrays his humanity, which deranges him and makes him go through a hell of guilt and lament. Secondly, because he is aware that it is by his very action of murder that he causes the forces of good to revolt and kill him, making meaningless both his decision to murder and his life.

The first section was devoted to study the intricate relationship between fate and will in Macbeth, focusing on the power of the witches and their premonitions. The witches represent evil and want Macbeth to be corrupted but their magic power is limited to foresee future events. Therefore, the way these events are accomplished depend on Macbeth's free will, on his capacity to choose between good and evil. The only way the witches have to make Macbeth fall into evil is by awakening his ambition, which is why they tell him that he will be king. After knowing his future, Macbeth is victim of his hurry for the crown, sharpened by Lady Macbeth's pressure, and Macbeth enters an inner moral debate on whether waiting for chance to crown him or get to the throne without dealy. Speculatively and rationally, Macbeth decides to murder.

Section two explored Macbeth's awareness, guilt and madness as indicators of his freedom of action, as well as his potentiality for being both good or evil as a crucial factor for the tragedy. Awareness, guilt and madness are intrinsically linked with each other, and are the result of Macbeth's cognizance that he freely chose to commit the crime. Macbeth's guilt and madness, then, arise from his awareness of free will: since he was aware of the implications of murdering, he was free when he chose to do it. Moreover, Macbeth is a dual character in the sense that he has a moral side as well as an ambitious self, for which he perceives both good and evil impulses within him. His absolute morality and loyalty in act one shows that he also had potentiality for goodness, which explains even more his feelings of regret after the murder. Most characters in *Macbeth* are either

good or *evil*, which emphasizes Macbeth's potentiality for both qualities. Lady Macbeth and Banquo, although on a smaller scale and in opposite directions, also have this potentiality for good and evil, respectively, and suffer from it as well.

Section three analised Macbeth's steps into evil, identifying the different psychological stages that Macbeth's goes through. Macbeth's knowing the prospect of becoming king makes him go from a *state of innocence* to *opening of new paths*: The royal prospect awakens Macbeth's ambition for the crown, but at the same time he also acknowledges the mutually exclusive, moral or immoral, ways towards kingship. It is not until he sees his coronation threatened by Malcolm's proclamation as Prince of Cumberland that Macbeth manifests an aggressive and conscious impulse to murder, for he reacts to this proclamation with possessiveness for the crown, and self-persuades himself that he has no choice but murder. Since the premonitions have guaranteed Macbeth the crown, he should not have worried about Malcolm's proclamation. Macbeth has a discussion both with himself and with Lady Macbeth on what to do, and although he is aware of the immorality of murder, and even resolves at first not to do it, he finally chooses to do evil in spite of his conscience. In the last stage, Macbeth becomes evil by doing evil, that is, he becomes evil after he commits murder. First, because he has banalized the act of murder and he has turned a cold-blooded person, being able to kill without compunction characters as innocent and harmless as Lady Macduff and his child. And second, because he is resolved to secure the crown at all costs. Additionally, he needs to make Duncan's murder meaningful, for he is aware that this murder has stolen from him his former, peaceful life; he does not want, then, to have lost everything in order to gain nothing.

In the last section I claim that the murder of Duncan is what triggers Macbeth's fatal ending in a cause-effect way, considering that the suspicion he awakens is what creates an inevitable revolt against him. Thus, it is not the prophecies which have made the English army revolt against him: it has been he himself. The tragedy is, therefore, provoked by his election and action of evil. In the

second premonitions, the witches again do nothing but foreseeing Macbeth's future, his death, telling him misleading prophecies in order to mock him and to laugh at his feeling of being invincible, for they know that he will actually die in Macduff's hands. This dooming fate is out of the reach of Macbeth's free will because it does not imply a decision: he is now the passive agent of murder. Finally, I assert that Macbeth's speeches of lament are the result of his awareness that it has been he himself who has created his personal tragedy: By murdering Duncan, he not only has betrayed the values he cared about, or cut himself off of his former peaceful life, but also he has become an isolated and distressed evil person.

Further Research

In a further research I would like to study the conceptions of gender in *Macbeth*. Throughout the whole play the reader is exposed to different views on what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. Although Lady Macbeth breaks down all preconceptions of feminine pusillanimity with her cold-blooded, iron will to kill, she is absolutely unfair to her own gender, describing Macbeth's fear of Banquo's ghost as "A woman's story at a winter's fire, Authorized by her grandam" (III.iv.156). Shakespeare, at some points, seems to be laughing at such stereotypes; for instance, when Macduff fears Lady Macbeth could not bear to hear the news of the murder she has so keenly planned: "O gentle lady, 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak: The repetition in a woman's hear would murder as it fell" (II.iii.85-87). Certainly, Lady Macbeth needs no spirits to "unsex [her]" (I.v.40). The strength of her ambition omits any of the traditional stereotypes of women's nature, although in a very sadistic way.

Equally engaging is the idea of manhood in *Macbeth*. The play seems to discuss social stereotypes of manhood, and even criticize them, for all the characters seem to have a very clear idea of what being a man implies, but such ideas are in contradiction with each other. For Lady Macbeth, being a man consists in killing without compunction and for one's own benefit. Macbeth, at least in the beginning, contradicts her in this respect: "I dare do all that may become a man. Who

dares do more is none" (I.vii.120). In the different definitions of *manhood* of the play, there is indeed a clear tension between honor and thirst for power. From the point of view of the *queer theory* each character would be *performing* the idea of manhood that their society has told them to. Moreover, the male-related honor for the nation seems to be even ridiculed when Ross informs of Young Seyward's death by referring to and emphasizing his manhood: "He only liv'd but till he was a man; / The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd / In the unshrinking station where he fought, / But like a man he died." The ease of Young Seyward's father at such news is astonishing: "Why, then, God's soldiers be he" (V.vii.47), which, as Kastan puts it, "even Malcolm admits 'He's worth more sorrow'" (Kastan, 2006: 17). In fact, Old Seyward's only worry about his son's death consists in knowing: "Had he his hurts before?" (V.vii.76), that is, he only cared about the fact that his son had died fighting "like a man", not fleeing "like a coward". If his son has received the wounds in the front, then everything is fine for Old Seyward.

It would also be interested in studying *Macbeth* through the lens of the 19th and 20th Century philosophers. The themes in *Macbeth* seem to predict, even combine, the most influential ideas of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Foucault or Sartre. Macbeth killing Duncan is a Nietzschean taken-to-the-extreme will to power; also Nietzschean is the conception of *good* and *evil*, since, for Macbeth, killing is only perceived as evil when it comes to murder the king: in Act One, the Captain of the battle tells how Macbeth "unseamed [his opponent] from the nave[l] to th' chops" (I.ii.97). Thus, stabbing a king is regarded as evil, whereas splitting a man in two is legitimate. Macbeth's initial fear at the thought of murdering Duncan makes him seem to not having killed anyone before, and yet we see in Act One that he was an experienced soldier whose "brandished steel smoked with bloody execution" (I.ii.19). This idea directly links with Foucault's idea that institutional powers (the Church, Monarchy) manipulate individuals to get what they want from them (being, as Seyward himself says, God's soldiers). In Macbeth's case, it is the different perception he has between killing an ordinary soldier and a king stems from the moral values of the

time, in which the king's power was thought to be in direct connection with God**.** Therefore, Macbeth's perception of something as heavy as taking someone's life is purely based on the moral values his society and his times have instilled in himself.

Also Foucaultian is the power struggle that takes places from the beginning to the end of the play, with the treacherous Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth's killing for the crown and the suspicious absence of Donalbain, which Roman Polanski, in his *Macbeth* adaptation of 1971, interpreted as another potential power seeker who consults the witches in order to hear kingship-related prophecies. As regards free will, Kierkegaard's and Sartre's ideas are also latent in *Macbeth*. King-Kok Cheung wrote an amazing article identifying Macbeth's attraction and repulsion towards murder as Kierkegaard's concept of *Dread,* murdering Duncan being "the alarming possibility of being able " (Cheung, 1984: 430) and "the desire to do what one fears" (Cheung: 430). Last but not least is Sartre's existentialism in *Macbeth,* for the main character experiences the idea that man is condemned to be free, because he is responsible for everything he does. A sharp existentialism is also present in Macbeth's last soliloquy, which seems an extract of the twentieth century most nihilist literature:

> "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time; And all of our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle, Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (V.v. 19-28)

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